

An important, boring speech

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It's hard to know what to say about State of the Union, since the speech Tuesday was long on examples of the results of good policy but short on the policy itself. ("As I understand it," [offers](#) Matt Yglesias, "gay soldiers will win the future by riding high speed trains to salmon farms.") Here are a few assorted thoughts:

- Good for the president for embracing American Muslims as "part of our American family." As Mark Silk [observes](#), Obama had little incentive to say this other than the fact that it's right and true.
- Two words Obama didn't say till the speech was winding down: "Iraq" and "Afghanistan." You might defend this on the (debatable) grounds that the budget deficit is the country's most pressing problem right now. I might respond that fighting two foreign wars for years and years is a [big part](#) of that problem.

- Two words he didn't say at all: "global warming." He did say this: "By 2035, 80 percent of America's electricity will come from clean energy sources. Some folks want wind and solar. Others want nuclear, clean coal and natural gas. To meet this goal, we will need them all." Translation: By 2035, 100 percent of our energy will come from a combination of dirty and clean energy sources. Some of the dirty sources will be dirtier than others, and some will have a nicely greenwashed sheen. We will pursue this goal for reasons unrelated to fighting global warming, since that isn't popular enough to mention.
- Obama promised to tighten the government's belt; he also talked a lot about investing in the future. But [how does he intend](#) to do both at once?
- Specifically (!), the president proposed freezing current domestic spending for five years. Ezra Klein [calls this](#) another example of Obama starting with a reasonable compromise--Republicans want to reduce spending to 2008 or even 2006 levels--instead of strategizing to end up there. Maybe the president needs to [brush up on his Niebuhr](#).
- It was weird to hear Obama brag about the U.S. having the biggest economy in the world, since [this will only be true for a few more years](#). What will presidents say then? [What will the church say?](#)
- I was glad to hear the president both celebrate the "don't ask, don't tell" repeal and follow it with this: "I call on all of our college campuses to open their doors to our military recruiters and the ROTC." [Whether or not](#) DADT is the real reason elite schools have barred ROTC, it's a defensible one--but it's going away. And unless you believe the nation shouldn't have a standing army at all, it's hard to argue against the military doing more of its recruiting among the economically privileged. This is just one reason that the *Washington Monthly* college rankings [are so important](#).
- The Republican response by Rep. Paul Ryan (R.-Wis.) was alternately dry and dark--and never all that concrete. It's hard, however, to blame Ryan. He's responsible for many of his party's most serious ideas of late (though he's not

above parroting the odd [nonsense talking point](#)). But he wasn't speaking as a guy with an economic [plan](#); he was speaking for a party that hasn't adopted his plan. This tied his hands a good bit. (Responding to SOTU is a pretty thankless gig.)

- As for the Tea Party Caucus response by Rep. Michelle Bachman (R.-Minn.), I fear the political takeaway here isn't "the Republicans are divided" so much as "Paul Ryan represents the New Center."

Obama's speech was by and large boring, predictable and vague. It [wasn't riveting television](#), but that doesn't mean it wasn't important. In direct and indirect ways, SOTU sets the president's agenda. I'd like a bold and concrete agenda as much as the next person. But with a hostile House of Representatives, an agenda that hangs onto some progressive goals (preserving social security, ending the tax cuts for the wealthy, maintaining that improving the economy will require *some* [investing/spending](#)) while focusing on unifying rhetoric is probably all we can hope for.